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Hot Topics on the Web Strategies for Research

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Some of the pitfalls of research on the Web are highlighted and exacerbated when the type of research being done is for "hot," controversial, or debatable topics. Who to trust, where to find the information, and how to determine what is reliable are all questions that will present themselves. However, the resources available on the Web are well suited for addressing many of the challenges of hot topic research. Finding points of view for obscure and well-known advocacy groups, finding the most current legislation on an issue, and finding recent events related to the issue are all actually enhanced and made easier by researching a topic on the Web. Knowing the pitfalls and benefits from the outset can make using the Web much more profitable for hot topics research. By using appropriate sites for topic identification, you can quickly build a useful collection of core sites. By knowing where to identify federal and state legislation, you can determine the state of current policy on a topic. And certainly, the Web is most likely to help with timely news and insight on advocacy groups that might provide no—or hard-to-find—printed materials on their positions.

The following strategies and sources will facilitate efficient use of the Web for hot topics research that results in a full, well-informed view of the topic.

Topic Selection

Some researchers approach the Web with a specific topic in mind, others with an assignment to write a position paper on a topic of their choice. Those in the first category may know nothing about a topic that has been assigned to them. The latter group may have no ideas for a topic on which to write. For each approach, there are similar ways to begin.

Researchers with an assigned or defined topic may either know nothing about their topic or have no sense of the context in which to frame an argument. These individuals may need to find an overview of their topic in order to identify and understand opposing points of view. Encyclopedias are great resources for this purpose. Online, of course, the most prominent is Britannica Online (www.britanni-ca.com). A keyword search results in a list of hand-selected Web sites that the editors have found to be informative and reliable, pointers to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (EB) articles, magazine articles available freely online, and books that may be purchased. The EB article will include varying levels of objective information on a topic, relevant statistics, scientific insight into the topic, and, for broader topics, a bibliography of key

sources for off-the-Web research.

Example: The coverage on the Britannica site for a research topic such as the death penalty includes pointers to those sections of *EB* articles that discuss capital punishment in a variety of legal systems around the world; informative abstracts and full text of selected newspaper and magazine articles from sources such as *The Economist*, *USA Today*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *National Review*; as well as annotated links to a variety of Web sites. The researcher using this site would be able to efficiently construct an outline of opposing viewpoints and arguments as a starting point for further study.

Unfortunately, the publishers of Britannica Online have announced that they will revert to a proprietary, subscription-based format later this year. At this writing, it is not known how much of the current site will be available when this change occurs. There are, however, other free encyclopedia sources on the Web that also provide useful background and overviews of hot topics. Encarta (<http://encarta.msn.com>) from Microsoft provides encyclopedia articles, charts and tables, multimedia, and Web site links.

For those having a hard time selecting a topic, the ability to browse a list of controversial issues is useful. Both Yahoo! and Google provide excellent Web directories that serve this purpose. The Yahoo! "Issues and Causes" site (http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Issues_and_Causes) lists eighty-eight top-level topics, along with the ability to drill down to hundreds of subtopics. These top-level categories vary in terms of specificity. The groupings are organized variously and might include links to related categories, pro and con sites, advocacy groups, online discussion forums, etc. These lists of issues and causes are culled from other categories within the Yahoo! directory. Clicking on a topic may result in being taken to a Yahoo! category that appears elsewhere in the structure.

The Google "Issues" page (http://directory.google.com/Top/_Society/Issues) is similar to Yahoo!, but has a more systematic approach of moving from broad category to narrower category. Starting with only forty-nine topics and drilling down to thousands of subtopics, Google also uses categories that appear elsewhere on the site. Without taking you to these categories automatically, Google offers these categories as choices for further drilling on the initial results page.

Another site worth mentioning is the Web Active Directory Topic Index (www.webactive.com/webactive/directory). This site is not as deep or detailed as the two sites described above, but its simple topic index is a useful browsing tool for those seeking ideas. It is a good source for locating activist groups.

Example: All three sites provide information on the death penalty. Yahoo! lists "Death Penalty" as a top level topic. On the "Death Penalty" page there are further listings for: "Death Row," "Execution Methods," "Juvenile Death Penalty," "Opposing Views," "Supporting Views," and "Web Directories." About a dozen direct Web sites are also listed on the page, each of which provides unique information on the topic. The Google directory lists "Crime and Justice" as a broad category on the top level. A click on that broad topic leads to a list including "Death Penalty" as a topic. Under "Death Penalty," the listings include: "Against," "Directories," "For," "Organizations," and "Personal Pages." More than ten Web sites that are good starting points are also listed. The Web Active Directory lists death penalty activist sites under the heading of "Human Rights."

One final type of site worth mentioning is the daily news digest. These sites are useful for identifying very current issues spawned by recent events or legislation. Some prominent ones are Yahoo! News Full Coverage (<http://dailynews.yahoo.com/fc>) and Excite NewsTracker (<http://nt.excite.com>).

Example: The death penalty topic is well covered in both of these sources. Click on this topic heading in NewsTracker to view current articles that the Excite news search engine culls from approximately three hundred national and local newspapers and magazines. Yahoo! News Full Coverage provides the added benefit of editorial expertise for selection of sources as well as a wider array of resources on the death penalty. It includes current stories from major news and wire services; a select list of related Web sites (such as "The Execution Tapes" recently released by the state of Georgia's prison system, both pro and con sites, and sites that provide statistics, legal decisions, and historic speeches on the topic); opinion pieces and editorials; magazine articles; audio (from National Public Radio); and video (from ARC News). Yahoo! News Full Coverage, while useful for browsing and topic identification, also offers one-stop shopping for Web research on a wide variety of controversial social and political issues.

Search Engines

Armed with a topic, context for the topic, and keywords identified through initial browsing efforts, the researcher is prepared to broaden the scope of a search in order to find more articles and Web sites that might be useful. Northern Light (www.northern-light.com) is a multipurpose Web search tool that provides links to Web sites, news articles, and proprietary content (in a "Special Collection").

"Vertical" or specialized, topical search tools try to capture a smaller slice of the Web in greater depth. They allow researchers to focus on resources most likely to be relevant. Because all controversial topics find their way to the political realm, focusing on political search engines such as Political Information (www.politicalinformation.com) might prove to be most useful. A search of this topical source provides hits from political and policy-oriented Web sites and political news sources.

Example: A search for "death penalty" in Northern Light produced 311,000 hits, while a search for the same topic using a specialized tool, Political Information, produced 3,600 hits (including pages from the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, and an ABC News poll on this topic). Both search tools require that the user spend time browsing results to find useful sites, but since there are many fewer hits from the specialized search tool, this task is more manageable.

Use a specialized search engine whenever possible. See the "Specialty Search Engines" listing (www.searchenginewatch.com/links/Specialty_Search_Engines) on Search Engine Watch to identify subject-specific search engines to keep your results focused.

Finding Laws and Pending Legislation

Many topics become "hot" by virtue of the fact that a particular piece of legislation is pending. Sometimes politicians begin the debate by deciding to redirect governmental funds, such as happened with welfare reform in the 1990s. Sometimes issues become "hot" because of events that spark public debate and pleas for legislative action. Publicly funded artwork is often a catalyst for such debate and once led several lawmakers to attempt a constitutional amendment outlawing desecration of the American flag. Essentially, legislation is the concrete way for our society to take action against or in defense of our ideological values.

LII: Legal Information Institute (www.law.cornell.edu) is a respected source of legal information that includes comprehensive overviews of federal and state law on a variety of "hot topics" such as adoption, drug abuse, children's rights, death penalty, environment, and welfare. Each topical overview provides texts of relevant sections of the U.S. Constitution, U.S. Code, federal judicial decisions, state legal codes, and decisions as well as links to key Web sites on the topic. FindLaw (www.findlaw.com) is a specialized search tool for legal information that provides access to legal news, Web sites, codes and case law. Use THOMAS (thomas.loc.gov) to search the text of pending legislation as well as public laws at the federal level.

Example: A search of these legal information sites produced the following resources to round out an examination of the death penalty topic:

- ◆ List of historic Supreme Court Decisions on this topic (LII)
- ◆ Legal commentary: article discussing polarization of federal judicial viewpoints on the death penalty (FindLaw)
- ◆ Proposed legislation: National Death Penalty Moratorium Act of 2001 (THOMAS)

Advocacy Groups

There is no clearer way of understanding specific points of view than by hearing from the groups that actively advocate that point of view. Many advocacy groups provide a clear mission statement for their organization on their Web site. Some provide links to current legislation. Some track how politicians have supported or opposed their efforts.

Example: These Web sites illustrate how advocacy groups can present their cases online:

Amnesty International: Death Penalty (www.amnesty-usa.org/abolish)

vs.

Leadership U: Capital Punishment (www.leaderu.com/focus/capital.html)

Or

ACLU: Death Penalty (www.aclu.org/death-penalty)

vs.

Pro-death Penaltycom (www.prodeathpenalty.com)

Proprietary Databases

Librarians, of course, realize the benefit of proprietary databases that provide access to content not available elsewhere. Some databases useful for hot topics research include:

Example: SIRS Knowledge Source (<http://researcher.sirs.com>). A descriptor search on "capital punishment" results in more than one hundred highly targeted articles from national magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* in addition to articles from newspapers around the country. Full text of the articles is included.

Academic Universe (<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>). Full-text searches on "capital punishment" or "death penalty" can be focused on finding articles in national magazines and newsletters, major newspapers, regional newspapers, transcripts, international publications, or legal materials. Results targeted within any one of these types of publications will result in hundreds of hits within the last year alone. LexisNexis has also announced a new "universe" called Current Issues Universe providing keyword searching or browsing by "issues list" of more than eight thousand documents from think tanks, advocacy groups, government agencies and other organizations.

Other topical databases also exist that will provide access to perhaps less mainstream (and likely therefore) more opinionated resources. Some of these include Ethnic News Watch, Contemporary Women's Issues, Bioethics-Line, and GenderWatch.

Resorting to Print

There are times that the Web may fall short and the researcher will need to rely on the print world. Prime examples include: a key study or book that launched public debate; biographical information on controversial persons involved in a debate; book-length, in-depth research of a topic; or handy compilations of a topic that reprint several points of view in one place.

Example: Greenhaven Press publishes a series of books called *Opposing Viewpoints*. One volume of the series is titled *The Death Penalty*. This volume contains an introduction to the issue, profiles the opposing viewpoints, and reprints articles that have appeared elsewhere in the popular press. Some articles are edited to fit the needs of the publication and are organized into chapters that outline the related issues.

Researchers are wise to keep an eye on library and other book catalogs in addition to their Web searches.

Web Site Evaluation

Evaluation is critical to the use of Web sources at any time, but particularly in this context. Because there is no real filtering mechanism to check accuracy, one cannot accept at face value the information found on the Web, particularly on sites created by advocacy groups.

Harris notes that information on the Internet exists on a continuum of reliability and quality:

Information is everywhere on the Internet, existing in large quantities and continuously being created and revised. This information exists in a large variety of kinds (facts, opinions, stories, interpretations, statistics) and is created for many purposes (to inform, to persuade, to sell, to present a viewpoint, and to create or change an attitude or belief). For each of these various kinds of purposes, information exists on many levels of quality or reliability. It ranges from very good to very bad and includes every shade in between.¹

Harris further notes that when evaluating information sources, there is no single perfect indicator of quality. You must make inferences from a collection of clues. Writers who have education, training, or life experience in a field relevant to the information provide the most credible information. On the Web, researchers should look for an "About Us" link to find brief information about site authors and their credentials. Additionally, they should go beyond what is provided on a site and look for other sources of information about the person or organization responsible for a site.

Researchers should also learn key techniques for assessing bias and balance. In an "objective" source, opposing viewpoints should be presented in an accurate manner. Harris notes that "there is no such thing as pure objectivity, but a good writer should be able to control his or her biases."² Does the author use a calm, reasoned tone or resort to inflammatory language? Does the site author have a vested interest in the topic, one where "the messenger will gain financially if you believe the message"?³

The researcher should be encouraged to consider the influence of our preconceptions on assessments of bias. Harris states that

people depreciate or reject information that conflicts with beliefs or conclusions already held. The facts do not speak for themselves. Most information is ambiguous enough to allow more than one interpretation to be put on it, and our interpretations are substantially controlled by what we already know and expect to find. However, if we are aware of these prejudices of interpretation, we can prevent them from misleading us.⁴

Does the author cite evidence to support claims and then document (provide references to) these sources, so that they are easily available for further research? Harris recommends that researchers "triangulate" an important information source, finding at least two other sources that support it. References supplied by an author can help in this process, but researchers should look for other sources as well.

It is also important that researchers note publication dates of information. What was true at one point may have been superseded by subsequent events or legislation. A health report from the year 2000 will be deemed more reliable than one from 1840; however, the 1840 report may give some useful historical insights into points of view or societal norms of that era.

Conclusion

The Web is a powerful tool for hot topic research. It can be a great asset in identifying topics, understanding pro and con arguments, finding recent events and legislative debate, and identifying organizations and individuals that serve as advocates for a cause. Misuse of information found on the Web can result in a fatally flawed research presentation. Conversely, failure to use the Web can result in many holes in hot topic research. The researcher with the most fully developed sense of the topic from all sides, the richest presentation of the players and their positions, will produce the fullest and most persuasive arguments for the cause at hand.

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